

Exploring Plot Structure in the Novel

Name: _____

Date: _____

Plot is the arrangement of story events—its “skeleton”—that defines the novel’s structure.

NOVEL PLOTS ALLOW MULTIPLE CONFLICTS

Because of the novel’s greater number of characters, novel plots often present multiple story-line conflicts, whereas the short story structure usually centers on just one.

Parallel plotting This technique allows the novelist to present more than one story line to the reader at the same time. Parallel plotting allows for contrasts and density of simultaneous action in conflicts. (An example might be showing prisoners-of-war busily digging an escape tunnel to freedom while their guards argue drunkenly over a card game in an adjacent room.)

Subplots Secondary story lines involving secondary characters often parallel or contrast with the main plot conflicts involving the central characters. Novelists construct some subplots to introduce humorous contrast into the plot. (One example: children working together to conceal a forbidden pet while their parents react to the news that they have lost their life savings in the collapse of a local bank.)

NOVEL PLOTS ALLOW FOR GREATER COMPLEXITY

The greater length and complexity of novel plots allow the novelist a number of extra techniques to build suspense and hold the reader’s interest.

Serial plotting This is a plot technique that creates suspense through a series of “cliff-hanger” chapter endings designed to keep readers turning pages to find out what will happen next. (For example, a chapter might end with the hero’s car stalled on the train tracks just as the overdue Metroliner approaches, speeding to arrive in Boston on time.)

Use of crisis in chapters Authors often introduce small peaks of dramatic tension within a chapter. This technique adds dramatic interest to the story line, chapter by chapter, while the overall conflict progresses to a larger dramatic climax near the end of the novel. (One example: a fistfight in an early chapter between two rival characters who later, at the climax of the novel, learn to work together to combat a raging forest fire that threatens the whole community.)

Time sequence Novelists can also choose to tell the story out of sequence. One technique is to begin the action *in media res* (“in the middle of things”) and then later go back in time in flashbacks to show background scenes that have led up to the present conflict. (For instance, beginning a novel with the main character in the intensive care unit of a hospital and then showing readers how she came to be there.)

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A NOVEL:

1. What are the major conflicts in the plot? How many story lines does the novelist develop? How does the novel make use of parallel plotting or subplots?
2. Does the novelist make use of serial plotting? crisis within chapters? alterations in chronological time sequence? What are the effects of using such techniques?